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Home College Series.

Number ~~~~~ \* ~~~~~ Eight.

# WASHINGTON IRVING.

BY

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DANIEL WISE, D.D.



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And what a young man may do in this respect, a young woman, and both old men and old women, may do.

J. H. VINCENT.

NEW YORK, Jan., 1893.

## WASHINGTON IRVING.

BY DANIEL WISE, D.D.

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THE third day of April, 1783, was the birthday of Washington Irving. The place of his birth was a modest, two-story house in William Street, New York city. He was the youngest of eleven children born to his parents, who, though neither rich nor high-born, were eminently good and respectable people. His biographers have traced his pedigree to a noble Scotchman who was armor-bearer to the Scottish hero, Robert Bruce. But the fortunes of the family had decayed, and Washington's father, after a brief career as a sailor in British waters, had married and emigrated to New York, where he established himself in trade.

Had young Irving's parents and friends foreseen that he would win a distinguished place in the republic of letters, they would have made more careful record of the deeds of his boyhood. But they saw no marked signs of promise in his character. To them he was only a lively little fellow given to prankish tricks, which, though often mischievous, were never malicious. They saw, too, that though he was full of natural vivacity, he was not even noted for superiority in his school studies. Hence but few incidents of his early life were treasured up.

His mother had named him after the Father of our country, because in the autumn succeeding his birth the victor's flag of our patriotic army floated over the fortifications of New York. Then Mrs. Irving said: "Washington's work is ended, and the child shall be named after him." And when, as President of the new-born nation, Washington returned to reside in New York, Lizzie, the boy's nurse, followed that heroic man into a store one morning, and, pre-

senting her wondering little charge to him, said : "Please your honor, here's a bairn that was named after you." With characteristic delicacy of feeling the President, little dreaming that his future biographer was before him, laid his hand on the child's head, and "gave him his blessing."

It was young Irving's good fortune to be raised in a Christian home; but it was unfortunate, both for him and for the world, that his father's piety was of that stern Scottish Covenanter type which, lacking the gentleness and sweetness of the blessed Christ, repels the playful and affectionate natures of sensitive children more than its sterling uprightness and rigid dutifulness attracts them. No doubt he thought he was doing a father's duty when, instead of permitting his children to spend their two half-holidays from school-work in the play-ground, he compelled them to spend one of those afternoons every week in studying the Catechism. On Sundays, too, they were required to attend three church services; or if one was missed, to occupy the hour in reading "Pilgrim's Progress." Such was the effect of this repression of childish feeling, that when they did play, their games were mimics of the preaching and sacramental services of the Church. Their mother's piety was of a milder type. Her nature was gentle, and her manners winning. She was proud, too, of her youngest boy; and when, in his father's absence, he gave vent in her presence to his spirit of fun, she would look upon him with admiring affection, tinged with sadness, and exclaim, "Oh, Washington! if you were only good!"

Doubtless the mother's gentleness weakened, but did not wholly neutralize, the effect of his father's sternness. In spite of her more considerate piety, as the boy grew into the lad, he cherished a spirit of alienation from the faith of the Church in which he was being reared. He expressed this antipathy at an early age by stealthily obtaining confirmation in Trinity Church. Had his well-meaning but unwise



father given judicious freedom to the playfulness of his child's nature, it is more than probable that his very sensitive soul would have been led into more than the mere formal respect he paid to religion during the greater part of his life. It is also probable that his writings, without being less literary, would have been conceived in a spirit and with an aim that would have added immensely to their ethical value.

Irving's school advantages were very limited. He attended private schools until he was sixteen. His teachers were men of only moderate attainments, except one Jonathan Fisk, his last instructor, with whom, however, he studied only a few months, and under whose direction he acquired a little knowledge of Latin. Two of his brothers were sent to Columbia College. Why the same advantage, the loss of which he afterward regretted, was not given him, is not known.

During his school-life he continued to indulge in prankish tricks. But his nature was too sensitive to permit his fun from lapsing into unkind treatment of any one. So keen were his sensibilities that he could not endure witnessing the harsh punishments often inflicted in those days upon rebellious school-boys. He was also noted for his truthfulness, never denying his complicity in any violation of rules in which he had participated. Nevertheless, he did often deceive his stern father, by stealthily taking lessons in dancing and by paying frequent visits to that forbidden ground, the theater. To this corrupting amusement he had been introduced by James K. Paulding, who was four years and a half his senior, and who subsequently became his literary associate. Once visited, it became to him a place of enchantment. His presence at nine o'clock to evening prayers being absolutely required, he used to go early to the theater, witness the first play, hasten home at nine, and then pretend to retire. Instead of going to bed, however, he would steal softly out of the window to the roof of a wood-shed, drop

thence to the ground, and make his way back through a narrow alley to the theater to see the after piece. Thus there was obvious inconsistency between his verbal truthfulness and this deception, which, besides being disobedience, was essentially falsehood in action.

It does not follow, however, that young Irving, though gaining little knowledge from teachers, was not acquiring mental materials for future authorship. His mind was exceedingly sensitive to impressions from surrounding objects. Though given to reverie and day-dreaming, he was still an observer of men and things. While school-books failed to command his attention, works addressed to the imagination charmed him. Hence his mind kept growing, but chiefly on its esthetic side. And this kind of self-culture continued after he left school and entered a lawyer's office. Law studies were as dry leaves to his poetic nature, and, though he pursued them sufficiently to gain admittance to the bar in 1806, yet he never mastered them. An excursion up the Hudson, taken when he was seventeen years old, contributed more to the development of those idiosyncrasies which made him a successful author than all he gained from his superficial reading in Coke and Blackstone. The scenery of that noble river made those impressions on his imagination out of which he subsequently wrought those bewitching tales that entitle him to be regarded as the Magician of the Hudson.

Symptoms of pulmonary disease alarmed his friends, and made them tolerant of his habits of ease, and so indulgent that when he was twenty-one they provided him with means to make a European tour. So delicate was his appearance when he started, that the captain of the ship on which he sailed, seeing him as he went on board, said to himself, "There's a chap who will go overboard before we get across." This grim prediction was not fulfilled. On the contrary, the voyage and two years of loitering travel under circumstances eminently favorable to his observation of men and

manners in the old world, restored his health, and added materially to the ideas and images on which his as yet undeveloped genius was nourishing itself into maturity and strength. It must be confessed, nevertheless, that his European experiences were not favorable to the right culture of either his religious or ethical nature.

Hence, after his return to his "old home nest," we find him shining as a "bright particular star" in a gay association of highly respectable but convivial young men. He was exceedingly handsome, full of genial humor, charming in his manners, a delightful conversationalist, and every way fitted to command attention and admiration in the most highly cultivated social circles. He was in fact at this time a man of the world, apparently without any higher purpose than to enjoy life, and forgetful of the unalterable fact that the highest and only true enjoyment of life is impossible to an irreligious man.

Up to his twenty-sixth year Irving's genius was a sealed fountain. He had been favorably known as an easy and promising writer of humorous sketches, the principal of which had appeared in the pages of "Salmagundi," a periodical which, though popular, was short-lived; and in the "Literary Picture Gallery," which had a still briefer existence; but probably no one suspected that from his then audacious, rollicking pen there was soon to flow a series of books which would command the admiration of the literary world in two hemispheres, and crown the brow of that seeming idler with the honor of being the first American *belles-lettres* writer to win recognition from English critics and readers as the equal of the best writers of English literature. But when, in 1809, Irving gave his "History of New York," by Diedrich Knickerbocker, to the world, its marvelous comicality not only set all the readers in America laughing, but moved Sir Walter Scott to write: "I have never read any thing so closely resembling the style of Dean Swift as

the annals of Diedrich Knickerbocker. I have been employed these few evenings in reading them aloud to Mrs. S. and two ladies who are our guests, and our sides have been absolutely sore with laughter. I think, too, there are passages which indicate that the author possesses power of a different kind, and has some touches which remind me of Sterne."

It is certainly not a very high moral achievement to make men laugh. Nevertheless, as Solomon observes, "There is a time to laugh," and since men will, and even need to, laugh at times for the purpose of shaking the cobwebs of care from their brains, one cannot refuse a measure of praise to him whose pen is skilled to excite not guilty but innocent laughter. Irving did this, albeit, there is in parts of the *Diedrich annals* a coarseness and indelicacy in the humor, which one cannot help wishing had been toned down to the standard of delicacy which obtains in the Christian society of our times.

Irving had by this work suddenly become a celebrity. No doubt the trumpet of fame sounded musically in his ears. But his heart was sad amid all this loud popular acclaim. Unquestionably he would have gladly exchanged his wreath of honor for the life of a young lady, Miss Matilda Hoffman, to whom he had been betrothed; but who, through a rapid consumption, had been made the bride of Death. This bereavement inflicted a wound upon his highly sensitive nature. It cast a gloom over his spirit which toned down its natural exuberance, and floated around his life to the end of his days. Years after, in a private note-book, he wrote of his lost love, "She died in the beauty of her youth, and in my memory she will ever be young and beautiful." One cannot but wish that he had sought consolation when under this affliction in the blessed Christ, instead of in active literary work and in scenes of travel, as he subsequently did. Had he done so, his writings, without losing much, if any, of their attic salt, would have been seasoned with that more precious salt of heavenly truth, which is the life of mankind.

Success is to most minds a spur to further effort. But Irving's dreamy nature did not respond to it. He was restless and undecided as to his future course. He entered into a business connection with his brothers, who were importers of English cutlery, but for the time being they did all the work involved in its management, and he shared its profits. During the war of 1813 with England, he served as aid to Governor Tompkins for a brief period. In 1815 he went to England, where, owing to the sickness of his brother Peter, he assumed the management of their business on that side of the water. But the effect of the war with America, and the closing up of the long war on the European Continent, was disastrous to trade and commerce on both sides of the Atlantic. Their business was, therefore, ruined, and Irving, on account of the continued illness of his brother, had to assume the unpleasant task of carrying the firm through the tedious proceedings of bankruptcy. But out of this misfortune grew his firm resolve to make literature both his profession and his dependence. Heretofore he had leaned for financial resources on his affectionate and generous brothers. But now in the hour of their pecuniary disasters he determined to make his pen a Pactolus out of which he would supply their wants as well as his own. So firm was this new-born purpose, and so strong his consciousness of literary power, that, notwithstanding his pressing pecuniary needs, he declined a chief clerkship in the War Department at Washington, which was offered him at this critical point in his affairs. The first-fruits of this determination was his "Sketch Book," which was published first in New York, and shortly afterward in London.

The success of his "Sketch Book" was very decided. It made him the literary lion of the hour, and that, too, at a time when Scott and Byron were at the zenith of their popularity. The critics, including the caustic Jeffrey, praised it very highly, as did also Moore, Scott, Byron, Rogers, and many other magnates in the literary world. Mrs. Siddons, the

tragic actress, on being introduced to him said of it, in a voice so deep and sepulchral that he felt nonplused, "You made me weep!" The doors of the proudest mansions in England were thrown open at his approach. Statesmen, military men, and philosophers swelled the chorus of popular admiration. He was, as his friend Leslie wrote, "the most fashionable fellow of the day," and there seemed to be, as Peter Powell said to him, "almost a *conspiracy* to hoist you over the heads of your contemporaries."

Irving was a man eminently fitted to shine in fashionable society. "He was," writes Mrs. Emily Fuller, who knew him well, "thoroughly a gentleman, not merely in external manners, but to the innermost fibers and core of his heart; sweet tempered, gentle, fastidious, sensitive, and gifted with the warmest affections; the most delightful and invariably interesting companion, even in spite of occasional fits of melancholy, which he was, however, seldom subjected to when with those he liked; a gift of conversation that flowed like a full river in sunshine—bright, easy, and abundant."

This graphic picture of Irving's social qualities contains the secret of the power by which he attracted to himself the admiration and friendship of the many persons to whom his writings secured him an introduction, both in Europe and America. The charm which gave fascination to his books was but the expression of himself. Hence, those who first admired the *author*, when they made his personal acquaintance, loved the *man*.

His "Sketch Book" was received as cordially in America as in England. He was, as he wrote, "completely overwhelmed" by the eulogiums passed upon it in the periodicals of his native land.

Had Irving been naturally a vain man this excess of popularity would have puffed him into self-conceit, and most likely tempted him into the fatal mistake, often made by authors, of trading on the good opinion of the public. For-

tunately, for his fame, vanity, was not a dominating vice in his nature. Hence, we find him writing when the brazen-throated clarions of fame were still sounding in his ears: "I feel almost appalled by such success, and fearful that it cannot be real, or that it is not fully merited, or that I shall not act up to the expectations that may be formed. We are whimsically constituted beings. I had got out of conceit of all that I had written, and considered it very questionable stuff; and now that it is so extravagantly bepraised, I begin to feel afraid that I shall not do so well again."

Without doubt this fear was wholesome, in that it stimulated him to put good work into his next production, which was "Bracebridge Hall," written so much in the vein of the "Sketch Book" as to be in some sense its continuation. It did not increase his reputation, albeit it kept it at the same level. Its most effective sketches are "Dolph Heyliger," and the "Stout Gentleman," of which a critic remarked that "his most comical pieces have always a serious end in view," a criticism which Irving pronounced to be true. But may it not be pertinent to ask, Is not the author's "serious end" often so deeply imbedded in the amber of his comicalities that few, even among critical readers, are sharp-sighted enough to discover it?

"Tales of a Traveler," published in 1824, was "more artistic," more finished in the style of its composition than his previous works. Had it preceded them, it would in all probability have been as warmly received. But to the easily-dulled popular taste it lacked the freshness of its predecessors. The critics, both here and in England, dwelt more upon its faults than upon its merits. Their scalpels cut him deeply, wounded him sorely, and so stimulated the melancholy tendencies in his sensitive nature, as to incline him to take morbid views of himself, of society, and of his choice of literature as a profession. For a time he lived idly in France, traveling somewhat, reading but little, giving some of his

hours to the study of the Spanish language, and suffering more or less from disease. That fashionable life had lost much of its charm for him, and that the mood of his mind was far from being cheerful is evident from many passages in his correspondence at this period. In those letters he expresses regret that he had wandered into the "seductive and treacherous paths of literature," and declares that "his path has too often lain among thorns and brambles, and been darkened by cares and despondency. . . . I have a thousand times regretted," he adds, "that I was ever led away by my imagination." He closes a year of comparative idleness (1825) and almost aimless rambling about the pleasant places of France, with this significant confession, "A year very little of which would I willingly live over again, though some parts have been tolerably pleasant."

Had Irving's literary aims been higher than to amuse his readers, had his heart been a temple consecrated to the ever living Christ, would not his reflections have been far more cheerful and satisfactory?

The profits of the books which had made him famous were largely swallowed up in unfortunate speculations entered upon at the suggestion of one of his brothers. The palled taste of the public no longer justified the writing of more works dug from the same humorous veins. Moreover, his mental depression inclined him to believe that the fountain of his genius was exhausted. Yet write he must, or his failing purse would soon shrink into leanness and beggary. But what should he write, was the perplexing question.

Happily for his fame his thoughts were attracted to the romantic events connected with the old times in Spain. He went to Madrid. He visited Granada. He trod the marble floors of the beautiful Alhambra. His imagination rioted amid scenes which it repeople with Moorish cavaliers and victorious Spanish knights. Then his genius revived. His fluent pen began to invest the generally unknown incidents



of the Conquest of Granada with an irresistible fascination. But at the suggestion of friends he laid that work aside, and bent all his energies with a persistent industry which was new to him to the production of his "Life of Columbus." The effect of this diligence on a work of higher importance than his previous productions was such, that at the close of the year (1826) he writes: "So ends a year of the hardest application and toil of the pen I have ever passed. I feel more satisfied, however, with the manner in which I have passed it than I have been with that of many gayer years, and close this year of my life in better humor with myself than I have often done."

His Columbus not only revived his popularity, but it also added much to his fame. Though over-wrought with rhetorical embellishment in some of its descriptions, it was accepted even by the critics as the best life of the great discoverer that had hitherto appeared. In addition to its scarcely definable charms of style, it possessed historical value, as did also his "Companions of Columbus," published shortly after. It is scarcely probable that a better life of the wonderful but unfortunate sailor, who did so much for mankind, will ever be written.

Mr. Irving continued to reside in Spain, more or less busy with his "Conquest of Granada," and with the documents found in Spanish archives, from which he was extracting materials for his "Legends of the Conquest of Spain," until 1829. In this year he somewhat reluctantly removed to London to fill the office of Secretary of Legation, to which he had been appointed by our Government, without either his desire or knowledge.

London society again opened its doors to the popular author, and he was soon satiated with its adulation. The leaders of literary circles hastened to lay their honors at his feet. The Royal Society of Literature gave him one of its gold medals as an author of eminent merit. Oxford gave

him the degree of D.C.L., a laurel which, while he accepted it, his modesty did not suffer him to use.

After two years of official life in London his heart hungered for his native land and for the renewal of his home associations. The charms of gay life in aristocratic circles had lost much of their old power. He found his "situation," he writes, "a terrible sacrifice of pleasure, profit, and literary reputation without furnishing any recompense." Hence he resigned his office, returned to New York, and to his former friends. It needs scarcely be added that he was received with a degree of warmth and popular admiration eminently satisfactory both to his affections and to his literary ambitions.

After making a somewhat extensive tour to the Southern and Western States, Irving resumed his literary labors. His purchase of Sunnyside, on the banks of the Hudson, followed. Our limited space forbids us to more than mention the further fruits of his delightful pen. After the issue of his "Alhambra," come his "Astoria," "Tour on the Prairies," and "Captain Bonneville." Then he went to Spain, where he served from 1842 to 1846, as United States Minister. Returning home in 1846, he subsequently gave the world his "Life of Oliver Goldsmith," "Mohammed and his Successors," "Wolfert's Roost," and, finally, his most admirable "Life of George Washington." All these works became immensely popular, and their profits, added to his previous royalties, made him a man of ample wealth.

In 1859 the ungentle messenger of death laid an iron hand upon him. Asthma, insomnia, and nervousness forbade all further prolonged use of his graceful pen, and made his few surviving months of life painfully uncomfortable. He had become a communicant in the Episcopal Church; yet we get no hint from his biographer that he was given either to religious conversation, reading, or meditation; but frequent statements that he beguiled many of his tedious hours by playing whist with his attentive friends. What his secret

thoughts were, or what his preparations for life's last mysterious journey, is unknown. Let us hope that this man, whose soul was so quick to catch every line of beauty to be found in nature and in human life, was secretly attracted also to Him in whom is concentrated the elements of all that is beautiful in the universe. Let us charitably hope that when, on the evening of November 25, 1859, he suddenly closed his eyes to the earth, he opened them on the shore of the beautiful land.

Regarded as literary productions, Irving's writings hold a high rank. He was master of a most fascinating style and of the "art of putting things." His imagination, though not of the highest order, was yet creative of characters, such as Ichabod Crane, Rip Van Winkle, etc., so real that they will go down to posterity like beings who have actually lived. In fancy he was inferior to few; perhaps it was at times excessive, causing him to overload objects he admired with rhetorical adornments. But his highest charm is the quiet humor and the half-concealed sensibility which exude like fragrant balsams from his sketches, tales, and biographies. Moreover, such was his love of the beautiful that he rarely painted the offensive or hideous side of things. In all his writings he sought to give his readers pleasure, and to avoid giving birth to painful emotions. He wrote pure English, and to him belongs the honor of being the first American author who won recognition in Europe as a master of the literary art.

It is also creditable to Irving that, though writing to please, he never ministered to the impure side of human nature. He never pandered to evil passions. Nevertheless, when placed in the balances of the sanctuary, it must be reluctantly confessed that his writings do not meet the demands of even a moderate Christian consciousness. Though not directly anti-Christian, they are not written in the spirit of experimental Christianity. Their sympathies are with the

worldly side of human life, with its gayeties, its frivolous pursuits, its contentedness with the good things of this life. In this they but express their author's character. Genial, lovable, kind, charitable though he was in his earthly relationships, Irving never carefully cultivated the spiritual side of his nature. His ideal of the Christian life was surely not up to the standard of Christ. Had it been he could not have seen, as he did, the marks of a true Christian in the weak and wayward character of poor Oliver Goldsmith, of whom he wrote:

"It has been questioned whether he (Goldsmith) really had any religious feeling. Those who raise this question have never considered well his writings; his '*Vicar of Wakefield*' and his pictures of the village pastor present religion under its most endearing forms, and with a feeling that could only flow from the deep convictions of the heart. When his fair traveling companion at Paris urged him to read the Church Service on a Sunday, he replied that he was not worthy to do it. He had seen in early life the sacred offices performed by his father and his brother with a solemnity which had sanctified them in his memory; how could he presume to undertake such functions? His religion has been called in question by Johnson and by Boswell; he certainly had not the gloomy hypochondriacal piety of the one, nor the babbling mouth piety of the other, but the spirit of Christian charity breathed forth in his writings and illustrated in his conduct, gives us reason to believe he had the indwelling religion of the soul."

That Oliver Goldsmith had a sentimental regard for the forms of Christianity there is no doubt. Unfortunately his unhappy life proves that this regard had little influence over his conduct. He knew the right, felt his obligation to perform it, but lacked the will or the power, or both, to comply with its claims. Hence he was a vain, good-natured, indolent, (except when spurred to action by stern necessity,)

self-indulgent, thoughtless, roystering spendthrift. Yet with all these blemishes in his life, with no evidence of his repentance, no sign of his being born anew, because of the sentimental charity that tolerates deeds which the Gospel condemns, and which never touches the spiritual side of men's nature, found in Goldsmith's writings, Mr. Irving sees reason to believe he had the "indwelling religion of the soul."

Alas! that our charming Magician of the Hudson should have had so dwarfed a Christian consciousness as to be deluded into the belief that a man so unlike the gospel pattern of a Christian man was a disciple of the self-denying Christ! Yet so it was; and, therefore, no spiritually-minded man, whose literary tastes make him an admirer of the genial master of Sunnyside, can well help recalling the words of his mother, when she cried, "Oh, Washington, if you were only good!" and exclaiming, "Oh, Washington Irving, if thy writings had been conceived in the spirit of thy soul's Master, they might have ministered not merely to men's amusement and intellectual profit, but also to the promotion of the world's growth in righteousness."

## POLITE LITERATURE.

WITH the pure thou wilt show thyself pure; and with the froward thou wilt show thyself unsavory.

*"Bid me discourse, I will enchant thine ear."*

There is that speaketh like the piercings of a sword; but the tongue of the wise is health.

Fancy makes vitality where it does not find it; to it all things are alive. On this unfrequented walk even the dry leaf that is stirred by a slight breath of air across the path, seems for a moment to have its little life and its tiny purpose.—JOHN FOSTER.

Every idle word that men shall speak, they shall give account thereof in the day of judgment. For by thy words thou shalt be justified, and by thy words thou shalt be condemned.

No one can be so absurd as to represent the notions which pervade the works of polite literature as totally, and at all points, opposite to the principles of Christianity; what I am asserting is, that in some important points they are substantially and essentially different, and that in others they disown the Christian modification.—JOHN FOSTER.

A good man out of the good treasure of the heart bringeth forth good things: and an evil man out of the evil treasure bringeth forth evil things.

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.—FRANCIS BACON.

# WASHINGTON IRVING.

[THOUGHT OUTLINE TO HELP THE MEMORY.]

1. Birth? Family? Pedigree? Childhood? Name? Home religious influence? Mother and father—characteristics? Church?
2. Educational advantages? Boy-characteristics? Theater? Law?
3. Health? European tour? Early literary sketches? "History of New York?" Impression made? Bereavement?
4. Cutlery? Military? England? Bankruptcy? "Sketch-book?" Success? In society? Humility? "Bracebridge Hall?" Next literary production? Sharp criticisms? Depression?
5. To Spain? Literary results? Honors in England? New York? Southern and Western tour? Other writings?
6. Illness and death? His literary style? Purity of tone? Religious element? Our regrets?

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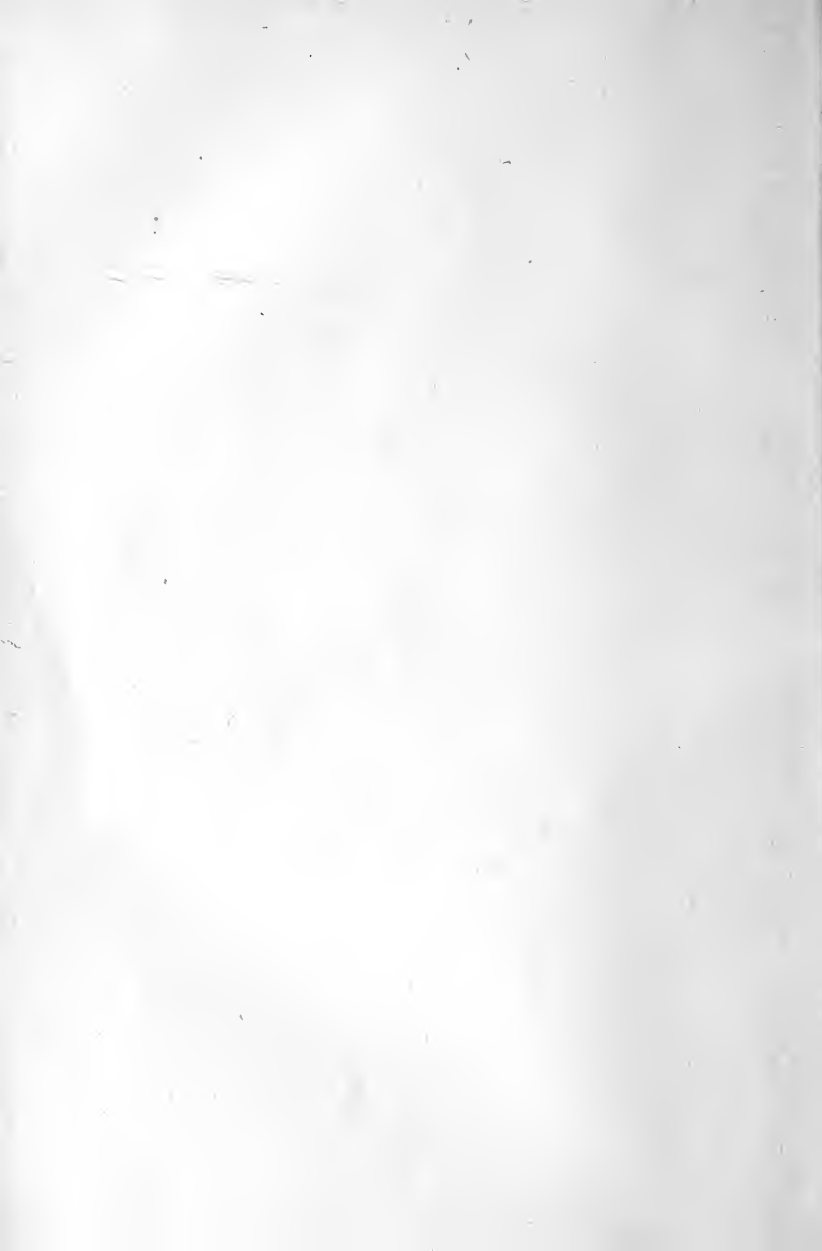
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